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Howard officials support Baltimore site for CSX intermodal facility

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Howard County officials this week declared support for Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake's request of CSX Corp. to consider locating its proposed intermodal facility in the city.

Since CSX Corp. announced its plans last year, the facility has been a subject of controversy in Howard County, which is home to two of the four proposed sites.

CSX has said it needs the facility so it can truck containers of cargo from the Port of Baltimore to a site south of the narrow Howard Street Tunnel, where they can be double stacked on trains for transport throughout the country.

Though local officials believe the facility is needed and would be a boon to the local economy, they worry about the impacts it would have on the surrounding communities. In particular, the proposed site near Hanover and Race roads in Elkridge — the least costly according to CSX's estimates — has been heavily lobbied against because of its proximity to more than 300 homes and a planned middle school.

"The mayor of Baltimore wants the facility in the city, and there is an appropriate site, and I support her efforts to build it there," said County Council member Courtney Watson, an Ellicott City Democrat who has been a vocal opponent of the facility being located in Elkridge, which is in her district.

Watson said there are several industrial areas in Baltimore where CSX owns land and could partner with the city to build the facility.

"I would imagine with the mayor taking such a public stance, they must have something in mind," she said.

Rawlings-Blake sent a letter April 26 to CSX CEO Michael Ward, urging him to consider Baltimore as the location of the intermodal facility.

"This multi-million dollar investment will create jobs for Baltimore's residents and secure the Port of Baltimore's future," she wrote.

CSX is partnering with the Maryland Department of Transportation to locate the facility south of the Howard Street Tunnel, which has created a choke point for double stacking containers on trains, a common standard in the freight shipping industry.

"With the widening of the Panama Canal nearing completion, we need to develop the necessary transportation infrastructure to ensure that more cargo can be efficiently transported to and from the port in a way that makes economic sense for shippers and keeps Baltimore relevant in the 21st-century global economy," Rawlings-Blake wrote.

A spokesperson for the mayor could not be immediately reached for comment on whether any potential locations have been identified in Baltimore.

CSX is noncommittal

CSX issued a statement but declined to say whether it would consider locating the intermodal facility in the city.

"We appreciate Mayor Rawlings-Blake's strong interest and continued recognition of the importance of an intermodal terminal to the Port and the City of Baltimore, and her desire to strengthen the local economy, create jobs, and grow the city," the statement said. "CSX and MDOT continue to carefully evaluate all options to develop an intermodal facility that will quickly address the state's growing freight transportation needs and the Port of Baltimore expansion."

Howard County Executive Ken Ulman said he supports the goals Rawlings-Blake outlined in her letter.

"(CSX) should consider any site that can work to solve the challenges of double stacking," he said.

In addition to the Elkridge site, CSX is considering a site near Montevideo Road in Jessup; a site near the state prison in Jessup, just over the county line in Anne Arundel County; and a site in Beltsville in Prince George's County.

Like other local officials, Ulman has raised concerns about the impact the intermodal facility would have on the community if it were to be located in Elkridge. However, he also has acknowledged the economic benefits of having the facility in the county and has touted the advantages of the Jessup site, which is surrounded mostly by industrial land.

But ultimately, Ulman said his goal is finding a site that will allow the Port of Baltimore to continue to be a leading transportation hub and major economic engine in the state.

"If that's in Howard County, we'll work through the process," Ulman said. "If that's in a neighboring jurisdiction ... I will support that as well."

County Council member Calvin Ball, a Columbia Democrat whose district includes the Jessup site and abuts the Elkridge site, said CSX should explore Baltimore as an option for the intermodal facility.

"I have long since had concerns about the environment and community impacts about placing that facility at either site in Howard County," he said.

In her letter to CSX, Rawlings-Blake said she has been "deeply troubled by the slow pace of this project."

Since the four proposed sites were identified in March 2011, they have been going through a federal process, outlined in the National Environmental Policy Act, that involves assessing each site for environmental, economic, archaeological and other issues.

Ulman said it is his understanding that if a site were identified in Baltimore that has previously been used as a freight yard, it wouldn't have to go through such a grueling process.

"It's a good solution to get a site resurrected, good for the economy, good for having (unused) property back in productive use," he said.

Leading the efforts against CSX locating the facility in Elkridge has been the Greater Elkridge Community Association.

"We're thrilled that the mayor's made the statement and is putting forward a plan from the city's point of view to put intermodal there," GECA president Howard Johnson said.

But he said his group will be "keeping the pressure on" CSX and MDOT.

"Until a site's chosen, until something's decided, you just can't stand down," he said.